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Brand Australia: half-truths for a hard sell

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In May 2010 the Australian government launched “Australia Unlimited”, a four-year Austrade campaign to sell Brand Australia. Logistically and politically, Brand Australia is a delicate proposition, since it calls for consistency and coherence, as well as consensus. Given that nations are already “messy”, politically, culturally and socially, any symbolic representation designed to resolve or mask this mess would be contentious. Brand Australia thus constitutes a fragile, highly contingent but, according to government bureaus, economically necessary strategy: globalisation compels nations to flag their strengths with clarity and in competition. Brand logic entails that these strengths are folded into a single and stable message. In the case of Australia, though, certain images have contributed to perceptions of the nation that clash with those of “Australia Unlimited”. The history of Australia’s tourism campaigns has played a part in this, as have specific events in Australia’s recent history. As an idealised national narrative, then, there is a fundamental problem with this campaign: it speaks of a cosmopolitan multiculturalism that is absent from other, more dominant representations of the nation, a disjuncture that undermines the premise and potential of effective brand management.

Keywords: place branding; Simon Anholt; Tourism Australia; Brand Australia; advertising

In August 2009 Trade Minister Simon Crean announced a twenty million dollar tender for Brand Australia. This signalled the government’s commitment to the logic and language of “place branding”. As Crean explained, Australia needed to update its image if it was to maintain its competitive edge in an increasingly globalised world. Lest taxpayers assumed that such work was already handled by Tourism Australia, Crean said:

We’re trying to sell our goods and services better to the world on the basis of better promoting the full breadth of our capacity. The more I go overseas and talk about our trading opportunities, the more I realise how little that’s understood . . . [The] tourists already know this is a great place to come and have a holiday. What we’ve got to convince people about is it’s a great place to invest, it’s a great place to come and be educated, it’s a great place to live, [and] it’s a great place to build your business base from.¹

Place branding is a relatively new concept in marketing literature. It is most associated with the work of British brand consultant Simon Anholt, whose advice has been commissioned by forty-five governments over the last decade. Place branding

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points to the various ways which nations “speak” and “behave”—or the range of contact points that link consumers with a place, and how these encounters affect perceptions of it, or its “strategic equity”.² It requires a marketing message to be sustained across multiple fronts, aims and agendas to be synergised across several industries, and various stakeholders to commit to a common vision. Ideally, such a strategy both inspires and activates.³ To this end, according to Anholt, the challenge is to not confuse “outward signs” of this realisation (such as new slogans, jingles and logos) with “the complex underlying strategy and long-term behavioural change which ought to underpin such ephemera”.⁴ Since perceptions of a place are fashioned from several sites, the branding strategy requires a context for diverse communication, not merely communication alone. Such latitude has important implications for Australia. Since the early 1980s, tourism campaigns have been important for selling Australia’s attractions to the world. In the schema of place branding, though, tourism is just one of several equally important indices. According to Anholt, even where imagery is well-known and mostly positive (such as “friendly”) the place brand still needs to be corrected: “the brand needs to be expanded to include the attributes, benefits and offerings that are more relevant and more motivating to the marketplace”.⁵ Economic forces thus compel a change in how the nation is seen: material shifts necessitate symbolic shifts.⁶

As an exercise that calls on some myths and motifs in the service of an idealised national narrative, place branding is highly problematic. Since representations of the nation are rarely free of discursive imprints, and almost always convey partisan perspectives, the notion of a national brand appears untenably ambitious. In its fidelity to principles and processes that owe more to the logic of global trade than anything else, place branding submits nations to marketing criteria designed primarily for inanimate products. While much of Australia’s economic output is indeed packaged as such—from education and theme parks to mangoes and software—the fact remains that the nation encompasses people with wildly differing opinions, aspirations and motives.⁷ Herein lays the main problem with Brand Australia: brand logic puts a premium on a commodity’s “core message” or “unique proposition”, yet “Australia Unlimited” clashes with contrary perceptions of the nation, both domestically and abroad. This is due to both the tenacity of particular stereotypes and preconceptions, many of which rest on imagery from Australia’s tourism campaigns, as well as the fact that recent events in Australia have communicated a nation at odds with the one needed for Brand Australia. Put simply, Australian tourism campaigns have hardened international opinions in ways that undermine Brand Australia, and certain events have damaged Brand Australia’s promise of a happy, cosmopolitan multiculturalism.

Brand Australia: “Australia Unlimited”

Brand Australia is based on Anholt’s collaboration with research consultancy firm, GfK Roper Public Affairs & Corporate Communications. In 2008, the firm drew on Anholt’s research into nation branding to create a Nation Brands Index (NBI), a system to gauge national reputations around the world. Its methodology reflects Anholt’s main contention that: “A globalised world is a marketplace where country has to compete with country—and region with region, city with city—for its share of attention, of reputation, of spend, of goodwill, of trust”.⁸ In turn, the NBI assesses

the “brand image” of fifty nations based on six areas: exports, governance, culture, people, tourism, and investment and immigration. Surveys are conducted annually in twenty countries—Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Poland, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States—through approximately one thousand online interviews with people over the age of eighteen.⁹

The NBI informs Canberra’s intentions for Brand Australia. Out of the fifty nations included in the NBI, Australia has twice ranked number nine for its overall image (2008 and 2009). According to Anholt, the NBI refers governments to gaps between a nation’s strengths and capabilities, and that nation’s brand image: where consumers fail to appreciate the diversity or specifics of a nation’s capabilities, a brand strategy can remedy this by spotlighting lesser-known attributes. According to the NBI, Australia enjoys a good reputation for the friendliness and competence of its people, and in this index ranks either first or second (to Canada). However, it has a less impressive reputation as a place for business, investment, and education—so it is known more as a “friendly” nation than a “clever” one. According to the government, then, there is insufficient international appreciation of Australia’s achievements in science and technology, economic performance, and higher education.¹⁰ The findings of the GfK-Anholt NBI were reflected in other research the Australian government commissioned from the Reputation Institute (RI), a private advisory firm that specialises in corporate reputation management; and market research firm TNS. So, the Australian government fused the data from the NBI, RI and TNS with Anholt’s insights to explain Brand Australia. At its national launch, Crean even referred to Anholt directly: “Anholt concluded that the rest of the world fails to acknowledge Australia’s economic impact, political gravitas or intellectual contributions. In simple terms, we need and deserve a better reputation”.¹¹

“Australia Unlimited” is a bold projection of the nation’s interests and competencies. After Canberra’s initial tender, there were sixty expressions of interest from agencies around the world. The brief was ambitious, if rather general. As Crean put it, echoing Anholt:

We’re not just after a slogan, it’s not just a jingle, it’s not just an advertising exercise, it’s to brand the breadth of what we’ve got to offer, the breadth of our comparative advantage so that the brand itself can attach itself to a lot more than just Made in Australia. It’s a statement about us.¹²

That is, Brand Australia was about ambition, maturity and confidence, without the underlying jingoism of economic nationalism.¹³ The tender evaluation panel was chaired by Austrade, and included representatives from Tourism Australia and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and was consulted by the Building Brand Australia Business Advisory Board (which included representatives from Lion Nathan, RMIT, the Australian Financial Centre Forum and Woolworths). With four agencies shortlisted, eight concepts were tested amongst 1000 consumers in fourteen countries, including Australia. The contract was eventually won by M & C Saatchi, the agency responsible for New Zealand’s highly successful “100% Pure” campaign, which Crean considered exemplary.¹⁴

According to the “Australia Unlimited” website, this campaign will “better position Australia as a global citizen, global business partner and world class destination”

and will “use the country’s many achievements to sell Australia as a unique, strong, fair and future-focused nation”.¹⁵ The logo, two boomerang-shaped arrows positioned to represent the Australian coastline, symbolically point out to the Indian and Pacific Oceans to convey the nation’s “unlimited” potential. In line with Anholt’s conception of place branding, the campaign does not just communicate one point but rather constitutes “brand architecture” that government organisations, industries and businesses could use to foster and promote their objectives. The launch at the Shanghai World Expo was both emblematic, given China’s growing importance in global trade and business,¹⁶ and strategic. It showcased Australia’s new brand identity—as creative, clever, and dynamic—to the 190 participating nations, and some 70 million visitors,¹⁷ 20 per cent of which were, according to Austrade, expected to see Australia’s \$83 million pavilion. It was also timed to precede the Soccer World Cup in South Africa (June 2010) and the Commonwealth Games in Delhi (October 2010), where Brand Australia would also be displayed.

The video that illustrates “Australia Unlimited”, used at the launch and on the homepage, reflects these goals. To the soundtrack of “Sweet Disposition”, a 2009 track by alternative-rock band Temper Trap (from Melbourne), its message works through an eclectic array of people, places and processes. Some of the famous faces include: accomplished actors, such as Cate Blanchett, Sam Worthington, Eric Bana and David Wenham; the Socceroos (Australia’s World Cup soccer team); Dr Fiona Wood AM, the 2005 Australian of the Year; Samantha Harris, the first Aboriginal supermodel; Circus Oz; and Maggie Beer and Simon Bryant (from the ABC cooking program, *The Cook and the Chef*). These are interspersed with imagery of industries and professions that signal Australia’s engagement with high-level research, innovation and trade, including: alternative energy sources (like wind and water); Wi-Fi technology; Google Maps; tertiary education; wineries; and Paspaley Pearls. Most pertinent to this discussion though is the way the video prioritises Australia’s cultural diversity. Between glimpses of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, the Bangarra Dance Theatre and penguins from *Happy Feet* is an extraordinary range of “ordinary” Australians—a range signposted by skin colour, religious dress, and ethnic background. These faces are not famous, but their inclusion obviously posits Australia’s multiculturalism as a marketing asset. Essentially, the thematic breadth here seeks to broaden perceptions of Australia to serve something other than tourism. In this way, and as Anholt explains, “place branding can be described as a species of self-defence (which is often pre-emptive) against the tendency of the marketplace to vulgarise, to trivialise and to summarise in ways which are often unfair”.¹⁸ As such, “Australia Unlimited” serves to not just sell Australia’s strengths, but broaden perceptions about what these are. As the rest of this article shows, though, it is still too far removed from dominant ideas about the nation. This is due to both the image of Australia presented in several tourism campaigns, as well as reports of incidents in Australia that conflict with Brand Australia’s version of Australian multiculturalism. Both these factors warrant closer consideration.

Tourism Australia: getting beyond Hoges

As the branding of Australia becomes linked to more than just its appeal to tourists, the consequences are at least two-fold. Firstly, “Australia Unlimited” projects attributes and associations that have been relatively underplayed in global arenas;

and secondly, the marketing of Australian tourism must acknowledge (if not integrate) Brand Australia's overarching themes. Brand Australia is thus framed as an opportunity to expand the nation's international image and seminally shift global perceptions. The challenge for Tourism Australia is to achieve some symmetry with this. There is a striking divergence though between the efforts of Austrade (through Brand Australia) and Tourism Australia (through advertising campaigns): "Australia Unlimited" conveys an expansive, inclusive and adaptive nation, while Tourism Australia's campaigns do not. There is then a discernible difference between the Australia that Austrade believes will inspire investment, business and higher education, and the Australia that Tourism Australia believes will attract travellers.

According to Anholt, an effective place brand includes a strong tourism component which points to the place brand's overall message. An overview of the various campaigns used for Australian tourism shows how difficult this is. Moreover this history shows a tendency within the marketing of Australia to offer only partial or skewed representations of the nation—with critical implications. These show a tendency towards a given formula that can be linked to the success of one campaign in particular: the series of four advertisements made for the Australian Tourist Commission (ATC, forerunner to Tourism Australia), that ran from 1983 until 1987, and starred Paul Hogan. This series has assumed such legendary status in the annals of Australian advertising history that every subsequent campaign seems doomed by comparison. The campaign lifted Australia's ranking as "most desirable destination" from number seventy-eight to number seven in just three months (at least in the United States, the campaign's target market); within a year, it was rated number one, and stayed at numbers one or two for twenty years.¹⁹ Much has been made of Hogan's endearingly "ocker" persona in this series, a perception that persists until today.²⁰ Ironically, Hogan has publicly resisted this characterisation, on the grounds that "ockers" are generally considered crude, chauvinistic and uninspiring—whereas his humour in the series communicated a more nuanced and insightful sensibility. Still, the campaign was a spectacular success, so much so that Hogan, who had donated his services, demanded that the ATC stop using it—mostly because it no longer served his career goals in Hollywood. Having not paid Hogan, the ATC relented.²¹

At stake here is the long-term implication of Hogan's appeal: his persona sold such a seemingly authentic image of Australia, as laid-back, warm, and welcoming,²² that tourism chiefs have yet to supplant this image with an equally successful alternative. This can be gleaned from an overview of Australia's tourism campaigns since the early 2000s: "See Australia" (2004); "Where the bloody hell are you?" (2006); "Walkabout" (2009) and "There's Nothing Like Australia" (2010). This shows that, despite a few modest attempts to break from convention, tourism campaigns for Australia tend towards a particularly narrow representation of the nation, and especially its people.

"See Australia" was the first major tourism campaign post Hogan. It was built on the findings and recommendations of the federal government's White Paper on Tourism, tabled in late 2003. The \$360 million global initiative urged visitors to "See Australia in a Different Light"—both literally (as in the light in Australia is unique) and figuratively. Launched in May 2004, the campaign was part of a major effort to revise Australia's image. Gone were the landmarks and settings popularised in the Hogan series—Sydney Harbour, beaches and barbeques; these were replaced with

a more upmarket and subtle mosaic. It was designed to reinvigorate Australian tourism in the wake of both international catastrophes (such as September 11, SARS and the Bali bombings), as well as what many deemed a protracted spell of industry complacency.²³ So, having consulted iconic organisations like R. M. Williams, Penfolds, Fosters, and the Australia Council for the Arts, the ATC aimed for a contemporary, cosmopolitan look and feel.²⁴

The campaign's centrepiece was a series of six television commercials, created by Whybin TBWA, with appearances from, for example, Delta Goodrem, Jonathon Coleman, Richie Benaud, Les Murray, Barbara Weir, Michael Parkinson and imagery by painter Brett Whitely. Wendy Whitely agreed to the use of her dead husband's work once she was convinced the ATC was committed to "a more refined image"²⁵ of Australia. At the campaign launch, the then Minister for Small Business & Tourism, Joe Hockey, explained why this "more refined image" was necessary: "Hoges was telling a story people wanted to believe. It was a great campaign for its time twenty years ago but we're beyond that".²⁶ Despite its breadth of vision and promise of long-term appeal, though, "See Australia" failed to "cut through", industry parlance for a campaign's capacity to reach a target market. The scale of this failure can be seen from Tourism Australia's next campaign, which completely inverted the logic of 'See Australia'.

"Where the bloody hell are you?" was launched in March 2006 after a five-month tender process, and thirty-one individual assessors. In its imagery, the \$60 million campaign was not too far removed from the Hogan series, with blondes on a beach, outback pubs and Aborigines at Uluru. One of the main selling points was Lara Bingle, then a relatively unknown eighteen-year old bikini model. Bingle was responsible for the advertisement's most important line: "We've saved you a spot on the beach, so where the bloody hell are you?" Through language, Tourism Australia contrived some version of Hogan's appeal. Tourism Australia knew that the word "bloody" could be problematic, but banked on the exposure such a "problem" could generate, and it did. Of the fifty-seven words banned in advertisements on British television (a target market), "bloody" was one of them. Desperate to save the campaign in one of its key markets, the tourism bureau sent Bingle to London (along with Tourism Minister Fran Bailey), to woo Britain's Advertising Clearance Centre directly. The ban was eventually reversed.

The Bingle campaign rested on what had become a familiar montage in Australian tourism campaigns; when Tourism Australia ventured beyond this tableau for its next big campaign, reactions were far from encouraging. In November 2009, Baz Luhrmann's production team (Bazmark) made two short clips for Tourism Australia's "Walkabout" campaign: "Billabong" and "Boab". These coincided with (and were therefore expected to benefit from) the release of Luhrmann's epic film, *Australia*.²⁷ Conceived by Luhrmann, and directed by Bruce Hunt, the two short clips were tied to what was meant to be a decisive moment in national cinema. *Australia*, starring Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman, was hyped to be a box-office triumph, a cultural revelation, and through Luhrmann's auteur lens, a grand multiplex advertisement for the nation.²⁸ According to Tourism Australia, the film's story of "transformation" was perfect to co-opt: just as the uptight Lady Ashleigh (played by Kidman) "found her true self" in *Australia/Australia*, so too could stressed-out tourists.²⁹ With the help of Brandon Walters, who played mixed-race Nullah in the film, the two clips juxtaposed dark, moody scenes of New York and

Shanghai with outback Australia, framed as a mythical place of rejuvenation and reconnection. As Walters says in them: “Sometimes we have to get lost to find ourselves. Sometimes we gotta go walkabout”.

This was a highly symbiotic relationship: the advertisements prefaced the film, the film showcased Australia, and *Australia* the film became Australia the destination. However, the partnership proved underwhelming for two main reasons. Firstly, the film was roundly criticised, both here and overseas.³⁰ For many, Luhrmann, once widely considered to be a master of bricolage and an unflinching iconoclast, had failed.³¹ Of the numerous explanations for this failure, the two most common were that the film toyed with historical fact far too carelessly,³² and did not project an emotional urgency for the land, its people, and certainly not for the Stolen Generations.³³ Not only was Tourism Australia associated with a project that did not deliver on the scale anticipated; but secondly, and in turn, Walters’s appearance for Tourism Australia seemed both glib and typical of a tradition in Australian tourism advertising to lock Indigenous Australians into a primitive, inescapable past.³⁴ Consequently, the advertisements drew many of the criticisms that had been levelled at the film: too expensive, insincere and uninspiring.

As the first project associated with Tourism Australia since the “bloody” controversy, the “Walkabout” campaign became symbolic of a nagging problem within the organisation: an inability to design a campaign that would enjoy the broad appeal that the Hogan series had. In the wake of its release, this perception was discussed on *The Gruen Transfer*, the ABC’s popular panel show about the advertising industry. Referring to the cost of the campaign—some \$40 million for the advertisements and a further \$10 million for their marketing—one panellist, Dan Gregory, quipped: “Maybe what we [should] do is give Baz \$10 million to make one movie, and give thirty Australian filmmakers \$1 million each and say, ‘let’s make thirty-one movies and maybe one of them will stick’”.³⁵ This was said in jest, yet it reflected a general opinion that Tourism Australia had reached a creative stalemate, with a success rate that failed to impress the “average” Australian. For its next campaign, launched in April 2010, Tourism Australia not only welcomed the input of everyday Australians: it seemed to depend on it.

Back to basics: ‘There’s Nothing like Australia’

With the strap-line “There’s nothing like Australia”, Tourism Australia invited up to 15,000 Australians to submit personal snapshots and twenty-five-word descriptions of their favourite Australian experience. The “best” of these (as judged by Tourism Australia) formed an interactive online map, and were linked to a television campaign to create “the ultimate insider’s guide to visiting this great country”.³⁶ Ostensibly, this was an opportunity for everyday Australians to help create the nation’s international image—and therefore to create an identity that reflected the breadth and diversity of both the place and the people. It was a chance to move perceptions of Australia “beyond just the rock, the reef, the harbour”.³⁷ Such openness from the tourism bureau was an obvious acknowledgement of new media capabilities: interactive, inclusive and participatory. At the same time, and if only rhetorically, it implied a possibility to widen conventional representations of Australia, beyond beaches, barbeques, and kangaroos. However, within just a few months, not only had the campaign culminated in a television advertisement that

simply reworked a familiar sequence of icons and attractions, but its release coincided with Austrade's "Australia Unlimited" campaign. The timing should have been an advantage, and a chance to consolidate a single message. However what emerged were in fact dichotomous renderings of the nation, with the associations in one at obvious odds with those in the other.

The Austrade launch preceded Tourism Australia's by just a few weeks, a closeness that only magnified the discursive differences between them. The television commercial for "There's nothing like Australia" was directed by Michael Gracey. As Gracey was also responsible for two of the most watched advertisements on YouTube (for Evian and T-Mobile), his appointment reflected Tourism Australia's faith in social media—Gracey had a reputation for creating advertisements that spread "virally",³⁸ and Tourism Australia was keen to co-opt social media.³⁹ The advertisement opens with two swimmers admiring the sunrise, ends with fireworks over Sydney Harbour, and is held together by a supposedly panoramic sweep of Australia's attractions: its natural beauty (including the Great Barrier Reef, Uluru, and the Twelve Apostles), birds and animals (such as the platypus, kookaburras, and kangaroos), and iconic landmarks and institutions (Sydney's Opera House and Harbour Bridge, Flinders Street station and Surf Lifesavers). The music, by Melbourne musician Josh Abrahams, is a catchy sing-along, "There's nothing like Australia". In contrast to the flagrant diversity in the "Australia Unlimited" clip, this commercial works through a far more abridged representation of Australia's cultural make-up. Despite several crowd scenes, it shows numerous Anglo-looking faces with only two obvious exceptions: Indigenous Australians (an elder at Uluru and a child in a billabong), and a child of Asian appearance in the back of a sports-utility vehicle, in awe of "these furry things that bounce around" (kangaroos). As Andrew Jakubowicz noted, the people here are "only marginally like the real Australia".⁴⁰ Moreover, the commercial revisits two of the most used vignettes in Australian tourism: drinking beer in a pub and a beach-side barbeque.

In its tone, visuals and accessibility, the television commercial is overtly indebted to the Hogan series of the early 1980s: the images are sunny and iconic, the people are (mostly) blonde, and the language is warm. The extent to which it clings to the formulaic reflects just how much risk there is in swinging too far from safe norms—whether through aesthetics (such as "See Australia"), risqué words (such as "bloody") or creative collaborations (such as "Walkabout"). According to Tourism Australia, the simplicity of the song and slogan is both intentional and necessary to translate smoothly across markets.⁴¹ Another explanation though is that the campaign's execution was actually informed not just by the contribution of the Australian public, but also: "what the international tourist *thinks* is unique and special about Australia"; and "what the tourism trade *knows* works best in advertising Australia overseas" (emphasis added).⁴² First, and unlike Austrade, Tourism Australia is not interested in expanding international perceptions as much as reflecting them; and second, the input of the "average" Australian was no substitute for that of professional insiders. The advice from the tourism industry then was succinct and straightforward: "show the icons, show the animals, make it fun and friendly" and "Keep it simple".⁴³ The problem for Brand Australia is that, in terms of promoting other aspects of Australia's appeal, the work of Tourism Australia could be a hindrance.

Within months of its launch, the television commercial for “There’s nothing like Australia” drew criticism for adding to an image of Australians that hurt business relationships globally. This surfaced in August 2010, in a survey of fifty Australian chief executives of mid to small businesses. It found an intense frustration with what most believed was an unfair representation perpetuated in Australian tourism advertising, starting with the Hogan series and revisited with Tourism Australia’s most recent campaign. The survey was conducted by Kimon Lycos, founder of Mihell & Lycos, an advertising company that specialises in business-to-business (B2B) marketing. Lycos is also Adjunct Professor in RMIT’s School of Economics, Finance and Marketing, which appointed Lycos in October 2009 to reflect and consolidate its position as one of the most high-profile providers of B2B education within Australia. This intersection of business, investment and education is exactly what Brand Australia aims to support, by selling Australia’s strengths in these areas. Lycos’s survey shows the clash between an image of Australians sold through tourism advertising, and one that would support Australians’ engagement in competitive global markets (besides tourism). The survey found 89 per cent of interviewees believed that their efforts to export and commercialise complex technology were hurt by a caricature that they traced directly to tourism advertising.⁴⁴ According to Lycos, “all that people are exposed to from Australia is people barbequing, relaxing at the beach. They become stereotypes”.⁴⁵ That is, in international circles, the image of the “friendly” Australian overwhelms that of the “clever” Australian.

Alternative perceptions: mixed messages

While tourism campaigns have played a part in perpetuating a particular image of Australia, it is argued here that recent events have also informed perceptions that are at odds with Brand Australia. Ironically these point to a decidedly *un*-friendly nation, or at least one that is far from cosmopolitan or politically progressive. With an emphasis on ethnic diversity, sustainable industries and the creative arts, “Australia Unlimited” brands Australia as a cosmopolitan nation primed to exploit the opportunities of global engagement. This idea of a national brand sits within a particular definition (or even brand) of globalisation, one that emphasises its benefits and glosses over its costs. For Sue Curry Jansen, globalisation functions here like a “controlling myth or master narrative”, into which individual nations “can project their respective micro-myths and articulate their aspirations for wealth, power, and enhanced visibility”.⁴⁶ Since the early 1980s, the Australian economy has become increasingly globalised, with the concomitant ascent of neo-liberal goals and assumptions in public policies.⁴⁷ This has had numerous effects on Australia’s political and cultural climate. While there is no need to catalogue the myriad effects here, it will suffice to note that the movement of people into Australia, for numerous reasons, is part of this globalising process.⁴⁸ “Australia Unlimited” paints a picture of a cosmopolitan nation, understood here to refer to a cultural readiness for difference and diversity (politically, ethnically and so on).⁴⁹ This sanguine image pivots on a reality of multiculturalism—but even this reality needs to be heavily qualified because it is interpreted and experienced in so many ways. Insofar as globalisation requires and accelerates international dialogue, and these contact zones would benefit from positive perceptions about different nations, then a nation brand should

act as convenient and reliable shorthand for how that nation is viewed. "Australia Unlimited" shows how Australia is ideally imagined in commercial contexts, but this picture of multicultural unity appears oblivious to the cultural and political fissures of the last three decades, or even the last few years. This is inevitable: branding is predicated on marketers directing consumers' attention to some associations at the expense of others—so it is unlikely that they will direct attention to negative imagery. However, when dealing with a nation (specifically Australia), inconsistencies and half-truths are, given the interests at stake, too dangerous to ignore. This, according to Janine Wilder, is a perennial problem in processes of nation branding: "Diversity in terms of people, culture and ideas does not naturally go together with the idea of one nation, one brand, one voice".⁵⁰

By way of example and precedent, it is worth taking stock of how Australia's tourism campaigns have triggered a range of oppositional responses. These not only underline the fragility of all national narratives, but also show just how difficult it is to align marketing strategies with national consensus.⁵¹ Within hours of the launch of Tourism Australia's most recent website, for instance, there was a parody website: *theresnothinglikeaustralia.net* (instead of the official, *.com*). Its strap-line was: "There's nothing like Australian humour". Under a picture of Lindy and Azaria Chamberlain at Uluru is this: "There's nothing like a dingo taking your baby"; and under a picture from the Cronulla riot: "There's nothing like welcoming the new guy".⁵² The speed with which this occurred showed the dexterity of consumers today, a public relations risk that now shadows almost every advertiser. With the launch of the (official) campaign, the head of consumer marketing for Tourism Australia, Kim Portrate said: "We understand social media has changed the way you manage brands and of course, when you put yourself out there with people inviting them to share their experiences with us, you're going to have to relinquish some control".⁵³ Nonetheless, Tourism Australia argued the new slogan was flexible enough to accommodate a variety of travel experiences, but was unlikely to attract "negative comments before [it had] a chance to properly launch it".⁵⁴

This is the dilemma Brand Australia faces now. Every marketing venture is the result of a decision-making process, but the implications of what is included or excluded are magnified within the context of an imagined national portrait.⁵⁵ The Bingle campaign and the 'bloody' controversy, for instance, not only angered many Australians who felt unfairly painted as uncultured ockers,⁵⁶ it also conveyed a blithe disregard of political ironies. This surfaced in a popular spoof of the Bingle advertisement. Produced by viral video company Downwind Media in March 2006, and directed by Dan Illic, the spoof became a YouTube success, and reconfigured Tourism Australia's airbrushed montage with scathing aplomb. Illic reasoned, "Why should we lie to the world about who we are".⁵⁷ It referred to the death of Azaria Chamberlain, the mandatory detention of refugees, Aboriginal deaths in custody and the race-based Cronulla riot of 2005. As a young man of Middle Eastern appearance says in a "Leb-speak" accent,⁵⁸ seconds before he is beaten up on a beach: "where the fucken hell are yous". Tourism Australia forced its removal from YouTube on the grounds of copyright infringement, and argued that the spoof used original music illegally. By the time Downwind Media agreed to change the music, it had been viewed over 30,000 times on YouTube.⁵⁹

Not only do Australians question the veracity of such marketing campaigns, through satire, parody and ridicule, it is difficult to contain international perceptions

of the nation. As the Bazmark “Walkabout” films for Tourism Australia were screened, for example, Australia’s reputation as a welcoming country was being undermined by growing reports in India of racially-motivated attacks against Indian-born students in Melbourne and Sydney, in 2009. Lurhmann even organised a personal “peace mission” to India in February 2010, a goodwill tour he hoped would remind both countries of their mutual respect and admiration. Lurhmann said at the time: “As artists, we can stand up and very directly say, ‘Look, this is not the voice of our country, this is not the attitude of Australians’”.⁶⁰ However, the sub-text was that, despite the biggest budgets and the grandest visions, neither Tourism Australia nor Lurhmann could escape the simple fact that these student attacks (which included muggings, beatings and one death) had hurt the image of a “friendly” Australia—and harmed Australia’s \$18 billion international education industry, Australia’s third largest export earner. By September 2010, commencements of Indian student enrolments were down almost 50 per cent on 2009 figures, while education agents reported declines of up to 85 per cent in expressions of interest for Australia by Indian students.⁶¹ Instead, they looked to Canada, New Zealand and Britain as more attractive options. In October 2010, Simon Anholt addressed an education conference in Sydney. He drew on these results and conceded that the damage to Australia’s reputation in India was indeed “quite severe”.⁶² Anholt also noted that the subsequent perception of Australia as a “pariah state” was not confined to India, but had surfaced “in countries as far away as Mexico and South Korea”, with “indications of falls in a great number of countries, some of which you would imagine didn’t have very much connection with Australia”.⁶³ His advice was to not ignore these tensions but to “ensure that the problems that caused the meltdown are fully understood and everything possible [is] done to make sure they don’t happen again, no matter how deeply [Australians] need to dig into the cultural, economic and social root causes”.⁶⁴ Such a targeted and long-term approach makes political and civic sense, but it exhausts the patience of contemporary markets.

Brand Australia is fashioned primarily for the pace and rhythm of global capitalism, what Gilles Lipovetsky calls “hypermodern times”.⁶⁵ In this case though, and ironically, the speed with which global markets move poses the biggest threat to Brand Australia. Specifically, the fact that the government has identified higher education as a drawing-card is worrying for Austrade. In November 2010, on his return from a tour of major recruitment countries, Fred Hilmer, vice-chancellor of the University of New South Wales, wrote of a burgeoning image problem for Australia’s education sector. Namely, the perception that the attacks on Indian students in Australia, coupled with a strong Australian dollar, severely dented this industry. For Hilmer, part of the problem was a general myopia in both the marketing and management of Australia’s assets, “apart from the sunshine, parks, beaches and those blondes”.⁶⁶ Events that suggest xenophobic tendencies within Australia, such as attacks on foreign students, render “those blondes” somewhat sinister, or at least emblematic of a racist undercurrent. Brand Australia thus appeals to economic imperatives (for investment, education and so on), but these will struggle as long as people—both within Australia and abroad—are influenced by stories and symbols that communicate very different messages.

Conclusion

“Australia Unlimited” projects cosmopolitan multiculturalism as one of the nation’s main assets. This makes marketing sense: advocates often present cosmopolitanism as a sophisticated politics, sensitive to the nuanced contours of contemporary globalisation. Ulrich Beck argues that within the cosmopolitan sensibility “resides the latent potential to break out of the self-centred narcissism of the national outlook and the dull incomprehension with which it infects thought and action”.⁶⁷ This stance sees in cosmopolitanism the potential for new forms of solidarity and connection,⁶⁸ through the triumph of “universalist” principles over traditional ideologies.⁶⁹ However, recent events in Australia reveal what John Tomlinson calls “the enduring pull of locality as a focus of cultural, moral and political solidarities in the face of the complex structural connectivity of globalization”.⁷⁰ This is a point worth stressing: Australia is a globalised society, its economy increasingly responsive to “an ever shifting and reinvented landscape of subcultures and lifestyles”.⁷¹ In turn, the cultural kaleidoscope of “Australia Unlimited” flatters a nation required to assert its strengths to more people in more markets, but it exaggerates the degree to which this image would find domestic or even international support. By Anholt’s own logic, Brand Australia is unconvincing.

When representations of the nation fail to acknowledge perceived truths, claims to unity or consensus come undone. Effectively, where representations of the nation are informed exclusively by marketing principles, as has been the case with Brand Australia, it is possible (if not likely) that, in their simplistic reductionism, they are more divisive than unifying. As Melissa Aronczyk argues, “While nation branding pays lip service to public participation and the diversity of opinions, its reliance on a ‘core idea’ to represent a national population comes at the cost of recognizing internal differentiation, resistance, or conflict”.⁷² Place branding submits nations to the same marketing criteria used to sell any other commodity, irrespective of the people that are automatically subsumed into the marketing message. A successful place brand, according to Robyn Mayes, “must be consistent and cannot allow for polysemy, plurality or contradiction without the risk of becoming an indecipherable cacophony widely agreed to be the ‘death’ of a brand”.⁷³ This results in a system of identification as impermeable and homogenous as a nationalist one.

A national brand is a discursive construct that is rarely (if ever) removed from the politics of power; it is always shaped and re-shaped in light of changing market conditions. As Ying Fan argues, “A nation brand is not owned by the nation, but by any organization that wishes to exploit the nation’s image and create a nation brand for commercial advantage”.⁷⁴ Austrade, through “Australia Unlimited”, gestures towards an egalitarian, cosmopolitan and technologically adept nation. However, it competes with very different projections of the place and its people. Through various campaigns since the early 1980s, Australia’s tourism agencies have marketed a picture of Australians as mostly white, blonde, and on either on a beach or in a pub. This image might be attractive to tourists, but Austrade’s brief (for Brand Australia) is wider than that—and requires the marketing of very different skills, competencies and attributes. However, while the video for “Australia Unlimited” showcases the cultural breadth of the population, whatever cosmopolitanism it implies is undercut by recent events that suggest a nation still struggling with at least some aspects of globalisation. The recent backlash from Indian students shows that events that

depict Australia as something other than progressive and welcoming (and therefore other than what Brand Australia implies) also have immediate and material consequences abroad. Ironically, while “Australia Unlimited” was informed primarily by Anholt’s work, his advice in regards to the Indian student crisis—to concentrate on “root causes”—speaks to an inherent weakness in the logic of place branding. Namely, the people and politics of every place are “messier” and more unpredictable than any brand message can possibly capture or convey. If nothing else, the globalisation of Australia’s economy should not be mistaken for a liberalisation of its political or cultural climate—“Australia Unlimited” overstates the nation’s cosmopolitan impulses.

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